take me home where i belong / i can't take it anymore
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by circlegames

Summary

It's 1970 when Neil Perry has been gone for 11 years. It's also the winter of 1970 where he comes back into their lives, Charlie teaches everyone how amazing parenting can really be, Knox pines terribly for something so obtainable, and Meeks and Pitts are married (in their terms-never the government's). It's the winter where everything begins and nothing ever ends, and everybody finds their own place at home.

Notes

aurora's runaway for the title! no beta <3

See the end of the work for more notes

Moments had given way to hours had given way to years. Todd hadn't known when the two had truly stopped communicating. Which was mostly, a lie. And when asked, which was very vaguely and only by a communicative teacher every six months with an envelope postmarked from England did the truth sometimes paw around the surface. The members had all drifted in various ways, some more so than others.

Pitts and Meeks had gone to NASA, skipping draft by being a little too homosexual. They hadn't minded, though. They weren't made for the war or its effort. Charlie had double citizenship in France from years prior with awful family vacations, so he didn't have to sign up. The draft had somehow swallowed only Knox, and by the time he'd gone he'd come back, harrowed and with a limp that was never going to go away. For Todd, they'd never called his number, and if they had, they'd have thrown him back anyways. He always wondered what had happened to the leader of their little group. He'd gone away to school in California, miles from anybody else without so much as a goodbye.

Nearly everyone from the Dead Poets Society of long ago had stuck to the east coast, and with the varying distance, kept up through letters and cards, a frequent phone call here and there during particularly rough times. Winter was closing around the bed again, and for the first time in a very long while, Todd felt as though he was coming down with something terrible. The veins in his body felt like they were boiling, and it wasn't until Knox finally sat him down in their shared apartment that he decided to go to the doctor.

Taking afternoons away from his classes at NYU was awful. Todd hated to be away from his students, and the thought of going to a doctor, much less an emergency one in Manhattan, was terrible. Knox was always sweet to try to get him places, but after the war and the subsequent accident, he couldn't drive. Cursing Pitts and Meeks for living so far away, the only person he could call was Charlie.

"Charlie?"

“Yes, darling?” Charlie’s voice was like honey. Knox could almost see the broad shoulders of the shorter man through the phone. Worried he’d spent a moment too long swooning, he began to speak up.

“You’re back in the States, right?”

“Got in just last night, love. Had to say hello to the kid. I’m back in my apartment now, though. What’s the matter?”

It was a common fact throughout the group that no matter how long Charlie was gone, no matter how much he were to travel, he would always do one thing before anything else. He always saw his daughter. He was divorced and lived in an expensive penthouse on the Upper East Side, which is what all young, rich, divorced lawyers did. Charlie made more money than Knox could fathom, especially after he’d come back from the war. Swallowing whatever that continuing feeling that bared against his chest was when he talked to his oldest friend, he finally got to the point.

“Todd’s sick. Not sure what from. I can’t drive him to the ER, and he can’t drive himself.”

Knox could hear Charlie’s heart picking up speed. Knox depended on the two of them more than he ever had before, and with the raging war picking up speed, Charlie found himself taken away to more and more cases outside of the country. He didn’t have to say that he’d come, for he didn’t need to. Knox knew he’d drop anything for the two of them, especially when he was in a pickle.

“Ten minutes.”

“Try not to kill yourself speeding.”

Todd groaned from his position on the couch. Something was happening to him, that was for certain. He felt like he was drowning, and not in a romantic way. He’d received his flu vaccine in a timely order, and it was just now beginning to snow. The news had blared that people were probably supposed to be staying home with the massive blizzard on the way. Todd’s throat was raw, his body was trembling. Knox was looking at him like a little lost puppy.

“I’m going to be fine, Knox. Stop fussing.”

“I’m not fussing.”

“You are. I can see you fussing.”

“I’m not moving?”

“I can hear what you’re thinking. I’m going to be okay.”

Knox smiled, sitting down. “You know how I worry about you.”

“I know.”

The two shared a sweet moment, full of love. The two were very close after Welton, and with the drifting of everyone else and most going to lead separate lives, they’d only grown closer.

The buzzing came a moment later, and Knox walked over to let Charlie in slowly. It was his first winter with the limp, and he didn't know if the cold was making it worse or he was just bound to suffer for his entire life. He didn't want to dwell on it.

"So it took me fifteen," Charlie lamented, "But I had to call Nancy. I'm supposed to pick up Helena for our weekend tonight, but I told her I might not make it tonight since this may take awhile and that I might have to get her Saturday."

"Charlie," Todd groaned, because although he felt sick, he didn't want Charlie to miss spending time with his daughter. The court had only allowed him every other weekend and major holidays because of his work schedule. Charlie had gone down a deep hole after the hearing. They'd been nearly not fast enough to pluck him from the ground. "I don't want you to miss your weekend." He started coughing violently in between sentences, and Knox looked as though he was going to pass out. "Drop me off and go. Knox can call you if he needs a lift or I need one home."

"Todd, you look like shit. Nancy wants her all the time. She's fine with giving me a moment."

"It's really no big deal. I can really just call my doctor tomorrow."

"Just let us take care of you, alright?" Knox huffed. "I'm going to get some stuff together for you."

"I'll come." Charlie said, and the two started towards Todd's bedroom and bathroom. Unable to move from the couch, Todd sat still, hoping that it wasn't as big of a deal as everyone was making it out to be.

"Has he been like this long?" Charlie asked, gathering up some

toiletries and toothpaste while Knox gathered up some clothes and a bag.

“Three, four days. He’s so stubborn he refused to go to the doctor. Thanks, by the way. For coming and taking him. You know I can’t anymore.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Knox. You know that, sweetheart. You never do.”

Knox paled stupidly from the name, as he always did. That feeling of guilt was building back up through his bones, and soon he was going to be so far gone through it that he was liable to do something stupid and impulsive. Swallowing whatever terrible word that was brewing, he joined Charlie in the bathroom, the bag in hand.

“He’s going to be okay.” Charlie smiled a bit sadly. “I know how you worry.”

“He’s all I’ve got so much of the time.”

Then it was Charlie’s turn to find something deep in his chest, a pang of hot and intense jealousy. Fearing he’d do something impulsive and stupid, he began to pack the toothbrush and paste into the bag, fearing he’d let the real secret to his divorce split whatever the two old friends had carefully cultivated.

Charlie had gotten married young, at 23 and right out of college, mostly because his girlfriend at the time, Nancy, had gotten pregnant, and he was determined to make the child at hand’s life better than his had ever been. Law school and come and gone, and in the midst of it all, he’d gotten a beautiful daughter in the mix. Helena was his best friend, and the sweetest little four year old he’d ever met.

His life had just about been ended when the divorce had come through with the subsequent papers on who was to get Helena for longer amounts of time. Everything was against him. From his work to the secret he'd uttered to his wife of the last few years, he knew he was going to lose the only thing that'd kept him together.

He loved Nancy, for whatever that was worth. He wasn't in love with her, but he loved her in the way that people only can when they are bound by a child they adore. And for the two, that was Helena. She was their lives.

It had been a dreadful night in spring when he'd told his wife something he'd never even uttered to himself. They'd had a rare night out, and Knox had offered to babysit for the two of them. While dancing at a club, Charlie had gotten insanely drunk. Nancy had driven them home, and he'd confessed that he loved Knox to her in the car on the ride back. *I've loved him half my life* , he'd said foolishly.

When the two had arrived home, Charlie stumbling and clueless on his way to their bedroom, Nancy had found Knox sitting on her couch, the couch she shared with her husband. He was sitting with their darling baby upon his chest, and she looked completely content in this place upon Knox's chest. She'd thrown him out without much explanation, and he'd reluctantly gone, always worrying over her, the baby, Charlie.

By the time she'd fed Charlie the divorce papers in the morning, Charlie could only remember bits and pieces. And as soon as he could go to Knox about it, Knox was off to fight in Vietnam. Life kept getting in their way. The loss of not getting his daughter for longer in the custody battle was excruciating, and Todd had been the only person he could go to. Knox was off in another country, and after the divorce and settlement had been finalized, Knox returned from the war, battled and beaten. It had been only Todd that had kept Charlie sane.

So the jealousy from earlier had slipped away, because he knew exactly what Knox had meant. Todd had kept them all alive the last few years, in his own way.

“He’s going to be okay.” Charlie assured, and helped Knox out to the living area, slower than he had been before.

“I’m going to be okay,” Todd croaked out as the two drifted to help him with things.

“We’ll take the elevator.” Charlie said once he’d gotten out of the apartment, making sure to lock it up behind the bunch. Todd was slumped against him, his arm thrown around Charlie’s shoulder more as a precaution than a need.

“We’re on the second floor, Charlie. It’s faster to just take the stairs.”

“Knox can’t take the stairs anymore.” He reminded, and Todd groaned an expletive in response from both his own pain and his carelessness.

Knox ushered everybody in carefully, and Charlie sent him a look that spoke without words. Todd was bad, that’s all they knew.

In the flurry of getting into Charlie’s car and Knox taking a moment too long as he always did now, a curse that plagued him, the worry of the day began to catch up with the healthier of the three. The snow was coming down in buckets now, and Charlie worried about parking as the drive became shorter and shorter to the hospital.

“Once we get him checked in, go and get Helena. If you don’t, you might miss the weekend.” Knox said once Charlie had parked quickly and gotten out, throwing Todd around his shoulder.

“I’ve got to make sure he’s okay.”

“I’ll do it.” Knox said, taking the weight for them both all over again. “I’m just going to have to wait out in the lobby while they figure it out anyways.”

“Do what he says,” Todd grumbled, the two beside him infuriating to be around sometimes with all their unspoken words.

There was only one person in front of them in the line, and Charlie fumbled with Todd’s wallet for a moment as Knox went to find a place to sit. The communication for that moment had gone unnoticed to Todd, but Charlie hadn’t had to say anything for the two to know what their plan was.

“Hello,” Charlie said, his arm tightening around Todd’s waist as he felt the man next to him begin to sway back and forth. “My friend here has been very sick for the past few days, and he’s only gotten progressively worse. Mind saying all your symptoms?”

Todd felt faint, but went on. “I’ve got a fever, it was around 103F the last time I checked it. I’ve got a chill, a horribly sore throat, and I feel very faint. I’ve also had stomach pains and a massive cough. I’ve thrown up a few times too.”

“Alright Sir, I’ve got all of that down. I’ll check you in once you can give me your insurance card, and then you fill out this paperwork while you wait.” The receptionist took the card from Charlie, and in a timely fashion for a New York emergency room, they were all sitting

down and helping Todd fill out paperwork.

“I’ve got the paperwork, Charlie.” Knox said, taking it from the young lawyer. “Go get your daughter.”

A moment passed between the two before Charlie stood up again. “I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be here.”

Another moment passed through them, and then Charlie was gone, walking swiftly out into the storm.

Around twenty minutes of agony for Todd passed by before someone came out to get him. Knox assured him that it would be fine, as he was going to be right outside the whole time, until he could go in later.

“Now Mr. Anderson,” The nurse began, rolling him into a small room to get all of his vitals, “Your symptoms are not looking very fun. I assume you have had a flu vaccine, as your chart shows you received one here not too long ago.”

“That’s correct,” Todd wheezed, the nurse poking and prodding him gently for his measly vitals.

“Well, since you’ve still got a pretty high fever and have been throwing up, I’m going to get another person in here to start an IV on you. Do you need anything else for comfort before I go?”

“No thank you,” Todd responded, happy that she was helping him into the hospital bed. He felt too weak.

“Hello, Mr. Anderson!” A chipper young woman exclaimed, coming in not too long after the previous nurse had left. “I’m going to start an IV on you. Do you have a preference on which arm?”

“Left, please. I write with my right, and I’d hate to hinder that.”

“Sounds great. This may hurt a bit while I get it started.”

She was silent as she got it set up, but she eventually turned to him while she was setting up the bag above his head. “The doctor will be in in a little bit. He’s tending to a gunshot right now, so he might be a bit frazzled when he comes in. That sort of stuff, no matter how much we see it, always frazzles him.”

“Thank you,”

“My pleasure. Hit the call button if you need anything.”

Todd sat again in the silence, wondering if Charlie had picked up Helena, if Knox had stopped fussing so much, and wether if he was going to die or if he was simply being a dramatic writer.

His eyes were still shut as a knocking and shuffling came into the room. “Hello, Mr. Anderson. I’ve heard you’ve been suffering quite a bit these last few days.”

The moments following were seconds that felt like hours long. The doctor in front of him was indeed a bit frazzled looking, his nice, curling bangs against his forehead looked disheveled. Of course, the silence between the two was something that could only be heard from the room inside.

Neil Perry was standing in front of him, and fearing he'd been put on narcotics already, Todd wiped his eyes. He felt like fainting once again.

"What the hell am I on?" He lamented. He hadn't seen the man in front of him in eleven years. He'd graduated with him in 1959. Todd was pretty sure it was still 1970, unless he'd somehow discovered time travel in the brief moments he was in the hospital.

"Todd?" The doctor in front of him looked like he was going to be the one passing out.

"I must be sicker than I thought."

"Todd Anderson. NYU's most brilliant, youngest poetry teacher." The *New York Times* article that had been written about Todd was suddenly flying off of Neil's lips, as if he'd memorized the thing. Neil was speaking like he was in a trance.

"Respectfully, Neil, I feel like I'm dying. I've either already died or you've got to cure me so I don't feel like this any longer."

"Right," Neil felt like his heart was breaking. He had to do his work. He hadn't seen him in eleven years. This had to just be another patient, even though it wasn't. It never would be for him. "From your symptoms, I think you've got a nasty case of pneumonia. I'm going to order some tests. The girl who was in here to give you your IV fluids

will be back in to administer them. She'll also start you on some medicine. I'll be back when that's all been finished up."

Neil left the room in a hurry. He felt like he was going to pass out. Which was not unusual for him on a late Friday afternoon. He'd already dealt with three gunshot wounds, five sick children, and a woman who had lost her baby today. On top of it all, his school roommate he hadn't seen in eleven years and had always been in love with had meandered in with a terrible case of pneumonia.

"Have you seen the forecast, Dr. Perry?" The nurse who had administered the fluids to the man in the room he'd just been in asked, pulling him out of the depths of whatever he was reverting back to.

"Uh, no."

"Snow, snow, and more snow! Go look through the receptionist window."

"Sure," He hadn't seen Todd in years. He'd stopped communicating with them all after he'd left for school, and with the absence, took most of his secrets with him. He felt like crying suddenly. He'd tried so hard to leave that part of his life behind, tried so desperately to curve all the feelings and poetic analogies he had used. He wanted to do nothing more than throw himself off of into the Atlantic Ocean then. That age old pain crept back into his bones. Peeking quickly through the reception area, he saw that snow was indeed coming down in buckets outside.

His eyes found the two quickly in the room. Knox, who was sitting differently, looked like he'd seen hell and come back, and was sitting next to Charlie, who was holding a young girl with a book in her hands. He couldn't hear what the odd trio was saying, but the older

two looked worried. It was more of a punch to know that they were worried about Todd. It hurt even more deeply to see that they had all had lives without him, had grown up without knowing anything about him any more.

Had Charlie gotten married? The girl in his lap had his face. What was Knox up to? And why did he look so unlike the boy he'd always loved? Fearing he'd begin to spiral, Neil went back to check up on some of his other patients.

Back in Todd's room, he was getting medicine he couldn't pronounce and tests that were prickling him. Happy, however, to be medicated finally. He was still reeling from the person he'd just seen, but he tried not to harp on that. He had almost convinced himself that he was back to seeing the actor in every light-hearted boy he saw, and was almost finished with convincing himself when Charlie came bustling into his room.

"Todd!" Helena screamed so loudly, Todd was briefly taken out of his pain killer induced high that was coming on.

"Helena!" Todd cheered in response, and the nurse who was checking his vitals smiled at the little group. "I missed you, kiddo!"

"Missed you too!" She smiled that beautiful little Charlie-like grin, and immediately sat herself on the bed with him, wrapping her arms around his legs.

"Nurse said you've got pneumonia pretty bad, Todd. I'm sorry." Charlie looked at him with a pitiful look.

Knox sat down in one of the seats next to him. "It's awful. Is he feeling any better?" He asked, the nurse looking up from her job and towards

him.

“Yes, Sir!” She was very chipper, and Todd noticed that that never seemed to go away. Perhaps it was her positive nature that kept her to be such a great nurse. “He’s on some medication. The doctor will be back in shortly.” She looked toward Helena then, who was eagerly giving her book, *The Secret Garden* , to Todd, begging him desperately to read it to her.

“My, she is precious! Is she yours?”

“She’s mine,” Charlie smiled sweetly at the little girl curled up with his friend. “Todd’s one of my oldest friends from high school, and he’s her godfather.”

“How sweet. It was good of you to bring him in, Sir. He was really sick.” She gestured towards Knox.

“I’m glad I did. He’s my roommate, but he’s so stubborn I thought it would kill him to get help. We’re all old high school pals.”

“Nice! Well, the doctor should be back in shortly.”

As she turned on her heel out of the room, Todd groaned loudly.

“Why can’t Todd read to me?” Helena’s eyes grew wide as Knox pulled her into his lap and off of Todd.

“He’s really sick, Lena. But I’ll read to you if that’s okay while Todd

waits for the doctor."

"Okay Knoxie!" Lena smiled widely at him, and Knox felt his heart break off a piece of itself and hand it to the little girl in his lap. He loved her so much.

"Before the doctor comes back in here, I should say that I think I need to be sedated."

"You're so dramatic when you're sick." Charlie huffed, pulling out Todd's chart at the bottom of his bed.

"Hey, cover her ears, Knox." Charlie felt his heart skip a beat as he looked at the MD caring for Todd.

"It tickles, it tickles!" Helena shrieked wildly as Charlie shouted an expletive in response to the chaos at hand.

"This isn't fucking real," He shook his head. "What the fuck, Todd. Todd! What the fuck is this?"

"What? What?" Knox asked desperately, taking his hands off of Helena's ears as he desperately tried to catch up.

A knock and an opening of a door shut the entire group up, except for the little girl in Knox's lap. She was climbing away from Knox and over to Todd quickly, and before Knox could stop her, she was cozying up to Todd again, begging him over and over to read to her.

Neil Perry felt like he'd been shot in the chest as he watched the scene at hand. Their faces held so much, yet he could not do anything to stop the looks on them.

"Your results are back, Todd. You've got pneumonia really bad, as I suspected. I'm going to put you on some oxygen, as your vitals are still too low. We're going to move you into the adult ward, so that we can monitor you overnight. Once you've moved, you're out of my jurisdiction."

"You motherfucker,"

"Charlie!"

"Daddy!" Helena began to cry rapidly, and if Todd hadn't been so caught up in his own personal pain, the pain of seeing Neil Perry all over again, and the little girl crying so quickly in his lap, he would have fainted. But everything was too much and he had too many drugs coursing through his system to really feel bad, no matter the fluttering of his heart.

Charlie scooped up his daughter then, who was happy to be in her father's arms. "Want Todd to read to me," She complained, and Knox patted his lap. Charlie handed her off, and felt his knuckles turn white at his side.

Knox was patting her softly, and if Charlie hadn't been so blinded by some sort of anger coursing through him, he would have melted at the sight. He always felt his heart crackle and pop when he saw his dearest friend with his daughter. It always sparked that dangerous feeling over again.

"What are you doing here?"

“I work here. I moved here a year ago. I was an emergency doctor in Los Angeles, but I hated it there. I got transferred here last year.”

“We haven’t seen you in years. Since we all graduated. None of us have heard from you since that summer.” Charlie wanted to hug him, wanted to punch him in the face, wanted so many things. But he couldn’t bring himself to do any of it except extend his hand to the taller man. “It’s… it’s good to see you, Neil.”

“Daddy?” Helena spoke up as soon as Neil tentatively took the hand extended to him. “Knox said we can’t stay at his house this weekend. Is that true?” She pouted, and Charlie had to turn away from the still painfully beautiful man in front of him.

“Todd is sick, love. But I don’t see why Knox wouldn’t come and see us at my place.”

Knox stood up next, holding Helena in his arms as he walked slowly over to Charlie and Neil.

“Good to see you too, Neil. It’s been far too long.” He extended his free hand to shake.

Neil felt his soul caving in. Why was Knox limping? Why was this little girl calling Charlie daddy? What was Todd’s role in all of this? Charlie wasn’t married, he didn’t have a ring. She seemed very close with Knox… but that seemed a little too impossible.

Knox extended his hand, and Neil shook his hand, looking intently at the little girl in his arms. She was clinging onto him powerfully, looking at him with quizzical eyes. “Knoxie, do you know him?”

“Yes,” Knox answered, and the tenderness of the scene made Neil’s heart crackle. “He’s an old friend of ours. He was your Dad’s best friend before I came around.”

“That’s silly. You can only have one best friend.” She laughed, a trilling little sound of wonder and amusement. “Hello Daddy’s friend!” She waved at Neil, and Neil waved back, wondering why he had tears building up in his eyes.

“He was really Todd’s friend in the end of our schooling, though. They were best friends.”

They were best friends held in the air too long before even the child responded, but she was keeping everything together with her little hands.

“Todd! Todd! Todd!” She cried out, trying to reach him again.

Charlie swooped her out of Knox’s arms and held her carefully to him. She began to relax a bit more. All of the outbursts usually made her tired.

“You’ve got a hell of a lot of explaining to do.”

“I know,” Neil mumbled, feeling small.

“I’ve missed you.” Todd’s voice came from the back, and Neil felt like he was going to faint or die. Perhaps one would lead to both.

It was then Charlie's turn to take a moment in the space. He looked intently at Todd, as if he was nearly begging him to stop himself from saying anything he would later regret. He knew the extends of what Todd felt, that was certain. He'd made a living off of that pain himself after they'd graduated. Todd had never told him, and they'd never spoken of it, but he knew. Charlie had always known.

"You're my best friend," Came Helena's quiet whisper to Knox as she reached over to him, clambering out of her father's arms and into Knox's own again.

The words broke Charlie's heart, and fearing he'd also say something crazy, he turned back to Neil, who looked like he was liable to fall over and faint at any moment.

"I'll give you my number before he's transferred. We'll want to see you again. If you'll see us."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay." Neil fumbled with his clipboard before writing onto a piece of legal paper, tearing it off swiftly. He needed to get out of here. It was a shame his shift didn't end for another eight hours.

The two men exchanged a brief look, saying all they needed to say. Charlie took the paper and neatly folded it into his breast pocket. Neil stood by them a few moments later before deciding to leave, the hours of the day catching up to him like a wildfire on a dry prairie. He had to get to the next patient. He had to forget before he'd never forget again.

In the hubbub of it all, Todd had started to cry. Fueled by intense pain killers, oxygen, and a warm little girl, he felt like he was fading. He hadn't seen Neil in years, hadn't ever believed he'd go through with it.

Had always wished he'd never gone through with the whole medical school thing. The falling snow outside was an all-to painful reminder that winter had never been a good time of the year for Neil. It was all coming on too fast. He'd left so much unsaid with him, and now that they were both grown up, it was all going to stay hidden.

Todd lamented on that. Why did it have to be? He'd hidden so much of himself away for so many years, it was nearly impossible to do anything else. Barely registering Knox and Charlie's sad looks towards him, Todd lent back into the hospital bed, feeling his tears fall softly down his cheeks. That love he'd always pushed away had never left the surface of his heart.

It wasn't long before various nurses and doctors came back into the room, and Neil poked in once to administer some paperwork before leaving without so much more than a word. Leaving the scene and patient behind to move up to the adult ward for watch, Neil couldn't help but steal a painful glance as Todd's cot was pushed out of the room and through the doors to another part of the hospital. Coming, going. That had been how they'd ended.

The number of Neil was still in Charlie's chest pocket, a sleeping child in his arms as he walked at Knox's pace behind Todd. The number was a gateway to the doctor. A decade of pushing away a love as intense as Charlie's own was certain to bubble over the surface and into whatever conversation they were having.

Back out on the journey to Todd's new room, the hour was growing later and later. The snow had let up just a bit, but there was still loads coming down. Neither of the men could stay once they'd settled Todd into his room, as neither were related, and Charlie had to leave anyways. He had to feed his daughter.

Todd was fine to wallow in his own self pity and new discoveries for one night, as he was so drugged Knox wasn't sure he'd even remember any of it come morning. Checking to see that the visiting hours were beginning at 6AM the next morning, Knox walked back over to Charlie and Helena, who was holding her Dad's hand and looking around in

wonder at all of the people milling about in the area.

“I’ll drive you home.” Charlie offered, swooping down to pick up Helena as they descended to the elevator and down to the first floor.

“I’d like to stay at yours. If that’s alright. I don’t really want to be alone. In case something happens to Todd and… “ The words *I can’t get there fast enough* hung in the air, but Charlie didn’t seem bothered by them.

“Helena will be happy to have you, anyways. Right, baby?”

“Knox!” She cheered loudly, and Knox felt himself smile as he turned to her little seat in the back of Charlie’s car.

“I’ve only got a few groceries. I picked up a few things last night, but you know how my fridge is most of the time.”

“Empty,”

Knox settled back into the passenger seat as the snow began to fall down peacefully around them. Charlie’s car radio was playing a Dean Martin song, and Knox felt like collapsing back into nothingness. He never thought he’d see Neil Perry again. He knew Charlie felt the same way, but he knew that they’d spend hours talking about it once Helena went to bed, anyways.

“I love this song.” Charlie hummed along, and Helena cheered from the back.

“Mmm,” Knox replied, the song reminding him too deeply of the buried feelings he had for the man next to him.

“Makes me think of you, babe.” Charlie smiled, and Knox laughed in response.

“Me too, me too!” Helena cheered, and although she couldn’t possibly know what the lyrics meant, it all felt a little too engrossing.

So Knox laughed. Because that is what friends were supposed to do. Laugh. Hide that feeling ripping your chest apart deep within your heart.

So as the drove to Charlie’s home to inevitably make pasta from scratch came to an end, the winter air around them felt deeply cold. The spark that always came back up to the surface for the men was still there, echos of *everybody loves somebody, sometimes . Everybody falls in love somehow* , from the the car ride back still ringing in their ears a bit too loudly.

It was hours later, after Knox had cleaned up the kitchen and Helena was sound asleep that they decided to do the one thing they were both dreading: the talk. They’d become so good at hiding whatever they truly felt that this was going to be like any other regular night by the end of it. They were dancing around the other, as usual. Neither could ever seem to slow down.

“I can’t believe it.” Charlie shook his head, sliding onto the couch beside Knox. “Neil Perry. After all these years.”

“It doesn’t sit right. Dr. Perry.”

“He ever write to you after we graduated?”

“No. I thought he’d probably gotten swallowed by the war. Guess I was the only unlucky one of us all.”

“He sent me a Christmas card once, a year after we all split. No return address or anything. It was too impersonal for him. All it said was Happy Holidays.”

Silence enveloped them as he pulled the folded paper out of his pocket. It was only 9PM, and the two felt the pull towards the telephone.

“I’m more worried about Todd than anything.” Knox confessed. He was the only person that knew exactly what Todd felt towards the long ago golden boy. Todd had never told the others what Neil had meant to him, as he’d confessed only to Knox. He held it in his heart deeply. Todd and him were closer than anything. They held each other’s secrets like a wave holding up the ocean.

“He was his best friend. But so was I,”

Knox just nodded, unable to say anything more as he looked out of the window at the Empire State Building, snow swirling in the air around it.

“You know something,”

“What?”

“About Todd. Neil. You’re good at keeping secrets, but not at

pretending like you don't know them."

"It's too personal. Todd should tell you, and will. Just on his own time."

"Come on, babe. You tell me everything."

"No, I don't." Knox confessed, looking back at his oldest friend.

Something shifted then, the earth cracking open to reveal a new layer underneath. Charlie was looking at him with that look he only got when he was drunk, and Knox felt his palms begin to sweat. Fearing he'd open up the shell inside and show the little pearl inside his heart, he licked his lips, desperate for the man next to him to just speak.

"I guess I don't tell you everything either." Charlie's eyes flickered down to Knox's lips, and even though there were a few lights still on in the apartment, Knox could see the swiftness of it. The fear. The longing.

Knox had bounced around the idea that his oldest friend felt the same towards him for years. He'd always believed he knew the truth between them. But with the timing never aligning, his daughter, and Knox's own struggles with success, it was never going to be right. Knox wanted to reach out and kiss him then. The feeling was overwhelming. Stronger than when Charlie had whispered over an expensive phone call that he was getting married to a girl he didn't love. Stronger than the time he'd held Charlie's daughter in the quiet of her room, the two of them unable to speak with their awe. Stronger than the time they'd graduated and gotten so drunk all he could remember was falling asleep next to him, their jostled ties choking them when they awoke.

The desire must have been pooling off of him in waves because as soon as he opened his mouth, Charlie spoke, nearly ruining whatever beautiful moment was being cultivated (and had been cultivated so many times before) again.

“Timing’s only ever helped Meeks and Pitts I guess.”

“Charlie…” Knox felt like he was going to cry he was so strung out on the feeling.

“Knox…” Charlie, in turn, knew exactly what was happening, knew exactly how he felt. Wanted to drown in the feeling. Wanted Knox to reach out to him and kiss him.

“We should call him.” He said instead, and all over again, the two’s hearts broke apiece.

“Right. Yeah,” Charlie pulled away from him, the proximity making his heart swell.

He pulled over the phone, the cord dangling across the couch as he dialed in the numbers.

His eyes met Knox again, and before either could say anything stupid, the dial tone ended.

“Hello?” The voice in the receiver sounded raw.

“Neil. It’s Charlie. And Knox.”

Neil rose slightly in his bed, the hours of the day and the conversation at hand exhausting him. He had so much to explain, so much to tell. Perhaps so much to keep.

“Hello.”

“We’d like to see you. Whenever Todd gets better. My schedule is… busy, to say the least.”

“Alright.” He responded, short-clipped answers feeling more right than long ones.

“When are you free?”

“I get the weekends off. I’m free next Saturday. Any time.”

“I’ll call again with Knox’s address. If Todd’s still really sick, we’ll reschedule.”

“Alright.”

Silence followed.

“It’s a damn good thing to hear your voice again, Perry.”

“You too, Charlie.”

They said curt, awkward goodbyes before hanging up, and then Charlie went to go set the phone back on it's table.

"I think I'm going to head to bed." Knox said afterwords, worried if they stayed up any longer, they'd reveal too much.

"I should too. Still a bit jet-lagged. Your stuff is still here from last time."

"Thanks," Knox nodded, padding away to the guest room. He was really the only person who ever used it. Charlie didn't have guests.

As promised, his pajamas from the last time he'd slept over were folded on the bed, courtesy of Charlie's housekeeper.

Knox changed slowly, sinking deep into the recesses of his broken up heart. A new day couldn't come sooner. He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

As Charlie trudged to his far away room, he felt like his heart was breaking. There was so much he wanted to tell him, but he could never find the words.

Checking on Helena, who was still sound asleep, he debated walking the distance to the guest room. Helena was not one to ever wake up. She was like himself in that way. She hated to be awakened and could sleep through anything. His wrist watch read 10:13PM. It would have been wrong, though. To tell Knox that he burned for him with his daughter sleeping in the room a ways away and Todd in the hospital. Swallowing that feeling, he kept walking. Timing had never been right for them.

Morning eventually came for the small, somber group, and Charlie drove carefully to the hospital. The snow had made the roads very precarious, so they had left much earlier than they'd originally planned. By the time they'd arrived, it was 6:30AM. The nurse on duty looked exhausted, but she was willing to help.

"Well, I'm afraid he's already got a visitor this morning. He isn't awake yet."

"Todd! Todd! Todd!" Helena shrieked, the sound reverberating intensely through the starkly quiet morning air of the hospital.

"I'm sorry," Charlie shifted Helena to his other hip, confusion riddling his face. "Did you say he has another visitor?"

"Yes! He was very adamant about seeing him. He got here before visiting hours, but he works downstairs, so we just let him in."

"Neil," Knox sighed.

"I'll talk to him." Charlie said, shifting to taking the weight for the both of them, pulling it off of Knox's shoulders and onto his own. "Can you take her?"

"Knoxie!" Helena smiled happily as Knox picked her out of Charlie's arms and into his own.

"I'll take us down to get breakfast. Would you like that, Lena?"

“Yes!” She smiled so brightly at the man that Charlie felt his knees grow weak.

“Bye Daddy!”

Charlie watched them walk away a moment, taking only the time any regular parent would take with their longest friend walking away with their child. He couldn’t risk being caught now, and especially not in a public place. He walked the few steps to Todd’s room, his heart catching up with his racing thoughts.

Sure enough, as soon as he opened the door, it was a terrible sight. Todd was still asleep, and Neil had pulled a chair up next to him, his hands placed on Todd’s bed in some kind of prayer-like formation. Charlie had known Neil long enough to know that he didn’t pray. He’d never believed in God.

“Neil?”

The sound from behind scared him, but it didn’t startle him. Neil straightened, pulling his hands from Todd’s bed.

“Hi, Charlie.” He turned in the chair, careful to whisper as not to awaken the sleeping man before them.

“What are you doing here?” The hushed force was evident.

Neil stood then, as if the standing was a pain to him, as if he was being ripped away like he’d gone through it before. Charlie

straightened, and not wanting to wake poor Todd, beckoned for Neil to follow him. They exited the room, and not really knowing where exactly to begin, Charlie was relieved when Neil began.

“Is Knox here?”

“He’s downstairs with my daughter in the cafe.”

“I’ve got so much to say. Your phone call last night… I don’t even have the words. We’d better get down there.”

They were enveloped in an awkward silence for two long-ago best buds, and by the time they’d gotten to the small cafeteria in the bottom of the large hospital, Charlie was very glad to see Knox and Helena. Helena was in a very heated discussion with Knox as Neil stood in line to buy their coffees, his offer.

“I got you a scone.” Knox said over the little girl. “It’s blueberry. Your favorite.”

Charlie smiled as he sat down next to Knox, Helena bouncing around on his lap.

“What were you up to, pumpkin?” He asked, and the little girl smiled widely before crawling over to sit in Charlie’s lap.

“SO much!” She grinned. “Knoxie was telling me that he and you called your friend! Doctor guy!”

“Yes, he’s over there. We’re going to be talking to him for awhile. Did you bring your book?”

“Yes!” She smiled. “I have a secret, Daddy!”

Charlie couldn’t help but laugh at the little girl. “What is it, baby?”

She smiled in her little mischievous way, and in a way that was nowhere near a whisper, began to say something that made both men’s faces so red, they could barely look at each other for a moment. “Knoxie is like my other daddy, Daddy! I love him just as much as I love you.”

Before the two could process it, Neil had arrived back with coffee. “I got it black for everyone. I don’t know what you like.”

Knox, broken from his stupor, spoke up first. “Charlie likes his sweet. You’d think he’d grow out of his sugar-filled phase.”

Charlie laughed, and whatever strange air that was between the three was stopped.

“I’ve got a lot to confess.” Neil began, and the others quieted. Even Helena, who was normally a bit rambunctious, sat mostly silently, happy to pick at her Dad’s sweater and eat most of his scone.

“I won’t lie when I say that I intended to leave everything behind. I did. I couldn’t face all of you.” He was twiddling with his hands, careful to not look either of them in the face. “So I went to school in California, and I tried to just obey my dad. After everything that happened, I had to just be glad he let me stay at Welton that last

semester. But once I left, I had to obey him. I couldn't go back.

"So I left. I sent some cards, but I couldn't do anything more. I had to try and live a life without it all. I never intended to see you drift so quickly, or to see and read about all the successes. Especially Todd's. And there's so much I left unsaid with everyone. I guess it's good that you came back into my life. Because there is so much I have to tell you all. So much I want to know. It could take years to say everything."

"What do you want to know?" Charlie asked, pushing some of his daughter's hair out of her face.

"Well, to start, who is this?"

"She's my daughter. Helena. I got married young, divorced younger."

"What happened to your leg?"

"The war. At least I don't have to go back." Knox replied, and beneath the table, he felt Charlie put a hand on his knee for a brief moment, as if it were an act of love. He supposed in some way that it was.

"Meeks? Pitts? What's happened to them?"

"They work at NASA now. They're…" Knox looked at Charlie then, as if the next secret was too large to give away.

"They're still friends." Charlie finished, knowing that years ago, Neil

would have loved to hear something different. But he didn't know this version of Neil now.

"What about you?" Knox asked, changing the subject. "Married? Kids?"

"No. I never…" He was beginning to stutter, completely out of character for the enigmatic boy. "After… I've never even thought about it."

Silence enveloped them all. Of course, Knox knew. He had to have. The glances and silences, the poetry and prose the two had created. Neil didn't have to say it. Knox had know that pain, carried its weight too.

"What about you, Knox?"

"There's never really been anyone. After I broke up with Chris, I haven't really seen anyone. I'm not too interested. Todd and I like to call ourselves the eligible bachelors."

Charlie smiled. "And I'm their bachelor with baggage."

"So Todd," Neil licked his lips, and Knox could see it plain as day. He still loved the poet. "I thought, well, after I read his book. I thought he was married."

"Ah, his book. Dead Poets Society. *New York Times* Best Seller." Charlie laughed, "Proud of that kid, but sadly, no. He's never even gone on a date since we moved up here. I thought my love life was starting to look pathetic. We don't know where he gets his material."

And then, thinking back to the conversation he'd had with Knox the previous night, shifted. "Well, at least, I don't."

"It's a complicated matter." Knox said, shifting to looking down at his coffee. "But he isn't married."

"How did Meeks and Pitts get to NASA? Are they married? Do they have kids?"

"They're just smart. They always have been. Wanted to put stuff up in space." Knox stirred his coffee with the little stir stick Neil had put inside of it, although he was drinking black coffee. "No kids."

Charlie's hand was on him again, and so Knox looked carefully at the man next to him. God, he loved him. It was deadly.

"As far as marriage, they're both married."

"To who?"

Knox found he couldn't say it. The only person who knew about the pair were himself, Charlie, and Todd. It felt wrong to say it out loud.

Charlie found the voice Knox had lost. "Each other. They're not married by any law, but the legality of it has never mattered to them anyways."

Neil was silent, then. For a moment that dragged on for far too long.

Helena moved into Knox's lap then, lying her head on his chest as she toyed with the buttons on his shirt. Charlie's heart swelled with the scene. As it always did.

"So you don't think it's wrong, then."

"What?" Knox asked, stroking the little girl's hair in his lap.

"Homosexuality."

"I've never even thought it." Charlie responded.

"There's some things that I couldn't give up. When I left it all behind. I was obeying my father, but…"

"But you could only do so much." Knox replied, "We understand."

"I don't mean to pry," Neil began, and Knox could hear the question before he'd even asked it.

"No." He responded, and Charlie furrowed his brow, but Neil shook his head, understanding.

"She seems very happy with you. Are you close?"

Charlie nodded, looking over at Helena, who was beginning to fall

asleep upon Knox's chest. "She's my world. I wasn't ready for her, by any means. But I can't imagine my life without her. I only get her every other weekend, because of my work. I get holidays too, though. So that's something."

"She's the best," Knox agreed, stroking her back as she fell asleep against him.

"As soon as Knox got out of the hospital, we both visited all of the time."

"It was worth every minute. I've loved her since the moment I saw her."

Charlie, not wanting to sit in this moment for too long, turned back to Neil. "I'd better go be there when he wakes up. I don't want him to think we've abandoned him."

"He'd never think that," Knox laughed a bit, and maneuvered himself carefully so that he could stand and keep the little girl asleep against him.

Helena's arms wrapped around Knox's neck, and the other men stood with him. Charlie felt his heart overflowing with love so powerful that it felt like lava from a volcano.

"Let's head back up. I'll stay out with you, Neil."

"Alright," Neil nodded, looking at the figure against his chest. She looked so comfortable with him, like she loved him like she loved her own father. Neil couldn't imagine the pain that Knox was harboring.

Nor Charlie's. He could barely lift his own.

As they flew up and towards the bed that Todd occupied once more, Knox settled carefully into a chair, Neil taking up a space by him outside of the clinic. He wanted to be out of earshot for when he spoke to Neil.

"She really loves you."

"I'd hope so," Knox smiled. "She told me so this morning, anyways."

They were silent a moment then, Knox trying to collect his thoughts.

"I think it'd be best if you don't see him until he gets better."

"What?"

"I know why you're here. If you didn't, you would have let them roll him away and up here and you wouldn't have thought about it. But you look like you haven't slept, and I don't know what your shift hours are, but I know you're here for a reason."

"I've got to see him."

"Todd's never gotten over you." Knox said, the blow sitting hard within Neil's chest. "You read his book. So I don't think it's any real test. When you left, that killed him. It killed him more when you never spoke to him again. He's blamed himself for years for that. At this point, he's convinced himself you went to war like me and died.

So you have to be gentle with him. Because I don't know how much more of you his heart can take."

"So he meant it?" Neil asked, desperation clinging to his voice.

He was suddenly transported by Knox's words to a date he'd left. Figuring he was destined to a life of pain and suffering in more ways than one, he'd asked a girl from one of his medical classes for coffee. It had been a mistake, because when he'd arrived at the coffee shop much earlier than her due to anxiety about dating a girl, he'd seen the book.

The cover was blue, like the iris of someone he'd loved. The title read Dead Poets Society by Todd Anderson. He'd picked it up immediately, and had left the date as soon as he'd bought it. He had spent the rest of his off day reading the book, crying and wondering why he'd never told him. The book had crushed him.

"Of course he meant it." Knox shook his head, "Todd never writes things he doesn't mean. He's always felt that way about you."

Neil was silenced by it all. "Is Charlie having the same talk with him right now?"

"Charlie doesn't know. I'm the only person Todd's ever told. It's implied in his book, sure. Heavily, I'd say. But he's never explicitly told Charlie."

Neil mulled his next question, wondering if it was even his place to ask. Swallowing his fear, he spoke up. "So you told Todd about Charlie then?"

“He knows. It’s a complicated matter.” Knox said, not wanting to talk about it with Charlie’s daughter on his lap.

“Knoxie?” Helena stirred then, sitting up in his lap. “Can we see Todd now?” She yawned.

“Yeah, pumpkin. Let’s go do that.”

Knox sat her feet on the ground and got up slowly. She waited patiently for him, and took his hand when he stood up by her. “I’ll call you, Neil. Today just… let him rest today.”

When Knox got to the room with Todd and Charlie, he could see that whatever they were talking about was tense. That Charlie was filling Todd in on Neil’s life, that Neil was going to be coming back into their lives. Charlie didn’t have to tell Knox what all he’d said, what he still needed to say. He knew Charlie would tell him later.

Helena crawled up on his bed then, and the little pair looked picture-perfect in some way. Knox was settling into the chair Charlie had given up to him, and Todd was sitting up, letting Helena rest against his leg, begging someone to read to her.

They didn’t know where Neil would fit into their little family, but once Todd got better, everything between them all was going to change.

Two weeks later, Todd was shaking as he straightened his blazer again and again. He’d been off all day in class, and felt sorry for it. He’d have only felt more sorry if he wasn’t swimming in so many thoughts,

he thought his brain would spill out.

Knox was still in the kitchen with Charlie, surely bouncing around the other with the way they always had. Neil was set to arrive in thirty minutes, and Gerard and Pitts would be coming in about ten.

He was more anxious than he had been in years. He was doing much better than he had been a few weeks ago. Charlie had gotten in the night before from Paris, having closed a case that was sure to make him even richer than he already was. He'd heard Knox fighting with him on the phone a few nights prior, complaining that he didn't want Charlie to pay for him to see more doctors. Todd didn't know if they had made up yet, but from the sounds in the kitchen, it appeared that they had. Charlie and Knox had been talking frequently on the phone with Neil, filling Todd in on everything he'd been missing. It felt overwhelming. And Todd should have been angry, but he couldn't seem to be bothered enough to.

A ringing sounded through the apartment, signaling the arrival of Meeks and Pitts. Todd was excited. He hadn't seen them in so long.

As he opened the door to the two, clad in their winter coats, Todd couldn't help but smile, even through his nerves. The two radiated a positive, happy love. They always had. Pitts was carrying a record, Meeks a bottle of wine.

"House warming gifts!" Pitts smiled, handing the both of their things to Todd.

"You've been here before." Knox laughed, coming out of the kitchen.

"We haven't seen you all in too long. Wanted to bring you all something."

“Thanks, guys!” Todd smiled, happily accepting both of the gifts.

“Meeks!” Charlie exclaimed, pushing past them all to hug the shorter man. “Missed you, kiddo!”

Meeks laughed, the air filling with the melodious sound. “Missed you too, Charlie.”

The old pair fell back into their usual banter as Pitts gave everybody hugs as well. Soon, they were all settling into the kitchen, Charlie and Knox keeping the food together while Todd poured out wine and other refreshments. Todd wasn’t very good at cooking, but Charlie and Knox were great, so they always volunteered.

Pitts was leaning against the countertop, nursing his glass of wine while his other hand was wrapped lazily around Meeks’ waist. They were happy to be in the company of the trio, as they were allowed to just be themselves there. It was the only other place they could do so, other than their own home.

The elephant in the room continued to not be spoken of until the doorbell rang once again. Charlie hurried to buzz Neil in, and sent Todd a look. Todd didn’t want to open the door. The feeling of doing so was scraping into his skin. He didn’t think he was ready. Everybody seemed to hold their breath until they heard the knocking.

“Act natural,” Knox tried, and the odd nature of it all made Pitts laugh, hard.

And as soon as Gerard started laughing, everybody else started laughing too. So by the time Todd had walked over the dreaded few

feet and opened the door, the apartment was a cacophony of fitful laughter.

"Hi," Todd began, wondering if he touched the man in front of him he'd float away.

"Hi," Neil said, and then the two were standing, staring at each other. Looking carefully at the other's lines and features.

"Come on in!" Charlie called, as if the apartment was his own.

Knox felt a warm feeling begin to grow within his chest. Everyone was back together. No matter the years, no matter the suffering it had all caused. They were all here, under his roof.

"Neil!" Pitts was the first to cheer, pulling him into a hug as though he'd been gone for only a week, not eleven years.

"Nice to see you, Neil." Meeks said once Pitts had pulled away, extending his hand to shake.

"Let's eat, gentlemen!" Charlie cheered, ruffling Knox's hair as he pulled the man carefully back towards the kitchen.

Neil's heart was pounding. He felt like he was walking on eggshells. Charlie had assured him that he had relied all information he had given him and Knox since they'd gotten back into each other's lives. However, that wasn't stopping the churning in his stomach.

Why had he left? Why had he ever left? His father had told him it would be easier. To leave things behind. So he did. He'd tried. He went away to California for school, and he didn't contact friends that had helped him through the hardest years of his life. Life had suddenly then gotten the better of him, and he was gasping for air in a world where he did not belong. A residency later, and he was somehow thrown into Los Angeles' emergency rooms. He hated LA. He wanted so many things for himself, but he never had the time. When the opportunity came up to move to New York, he took it. He'd always wanted to live in Manhattan. And now that he did, he was free to do as he pleased. See a Broadway show, wallow in his misery of knowing that the love of his life taught at NYU. So in prospective, he'd never really given up everything he'd promised his father that fateful night so many years ago. He'd just tried desperately to, and that had created a hole in his empty heart.

The six moved around each other carefully, as if they still weren't sure how to maneuver around everything. They all settled into the dining table, Charlie pestering Knox to sit down, Knox losing the battle. Meeks and Pitts were smooshed close together at the table, not bothering to care that Pitts' chair was pushed so far to the end's side that it was practically disrupting the two on the side.

Meeks was nervous, obviously. From the new addition to the group they'd so perfectly come to cultivate. Pitts could read him though, and the closeness of the chair settled Meeks down. "It's gonna be okay, Steve." Pitts whispered, giving him a quick kiss as everyone bounced around each other for places to sit.

Neil didn't want to say anything, fearing that his happiness would come off as rude, homophobic, even. But he had never seen people like him interact. He could barely even call himself gay until he'd fled high school, and by then, it was too long since he could talk to anyone who knew how to comfort him. Friends he'd always trusted he'd stopped speaking to. But this was new. There was a future where he could be happy still. Happy around the bustling crowd before him.

"Knox made steak. Since he's a genius in the kitchen." Charlie said,

setting plates down in front of everyone.

“You flatter me,” Knox shook his head, passing the wine bottle over to Meeks.

“I don’t have anything better to do, baby.”

Todd laughed at the statement, and everyone joined in. Too much love and not enough courage in their hearts.

“Can we eat before I get sick?” Meeks chided, laughing.

Charlie laughed then, bold and bright. He sat down finally, and everybody settled into conversation. Strange and oddly bittersweet, it was slowly beginning to cook back into what it had always been.

The night dragged on and on. Knox already knew the plan. Pitts and Meeks were catching the train back, and he was leaving Todd to his own devices. They cleaned up and said languid goodbyes, wondering if it was all still a dream.

“Todd?” Knox knocked on the poet’s door, wondering if the kid was coming back or if he was calming himself down. He’d disappeared a little while after they’d eaten, and no one had said anything. They knew Todd needed his time.

“Yeah?” He asked, taking his head out of his hands as he looked over at Knox.

“Was wondering if you were still alive in here. Pitts and Meeks went to catch the train back. I’m heading over to Charlie’s.”

“I know I need to do it.”

“I don’t have to tell you that.” Knox shut the door behind himself, sitting next to Todd.

“I just don’t know how to face him. Where to even start.”

“I know.”

“Will you be coming home from Charlie’s later?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You should tell him.”

“I can’t do that. Besides, I think we’re still in some sort of fight. For whatever that’s worth.”

“A fight?” Todd laughed despite himself.

“About treatment for me. I don’t want him to pay for it. Besides, I’ve seen enough doctors.”

“But you don’t make enough money with your paralegal job to see good physical therapists. That’s supposed to help you.”

“I know it’s supposed to help me. I just don’t want Charlie to pay for it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want him to feel like he has to take care of me. I’m not a kid he can help out.”

“He doesn’t see it like that.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. He wants to pay for it, Knox.”

“I just can’t let him. He already drives me everywhere, and… I don’t know. It’s just too much.”

“He wants to do it because he loves you.”

“I know.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know.” Knox sighed gravely. “Look, I just came to tell you not to do anything drastic tonight. It’s been years since we’ve seen him. I want what’s best for you. If that isn’t Neil anymore, it isn’t Neil. You’re allowed to love somebody else.”

“It’s only ever been him. You’re one to talk.”

“Hypocritical of me, wasn’t it?” They shared a smile that turned to a laugh, and Knox stood, waving as he walked out the door and towards Charlie, who was twirling his Lamborghini keys on his finger.

He was laughing about something Neil had said, and the two looked happy. It made Knox’s heart swell. Charlie had lost so much when Neil had never sent more than the Christmas card. Neil had been his oldest friend. Knox wondered if Neil was going to get that title back sometime soon.

“Ready to rock n’ roll, babe?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow morning, Neil. If you’re still here. Todd hates driving, but he’ll do it. Just pester him when you want to go home.”

Neil nodded, feeling that hole open back up in his stomach. Todd had left dinner early, and was still in his bedroom. Pain seemed to accompany Neil everywhere tonight.

“We’ll see you, slick.”

“Bye you two.”

Neil kept staring at the door to Todd’s bedroom after the two had left, feeling like he’d been waiting for a moment like this his whole life. Like he’d finally been given this beautiful chance. Even with the knowledge of everything he had, even after figuring he still felt the same way after so many years, he still felt like Todd was never going to want him. It seemed impossible, even with the evidence.

Swallowing whatever was building up inside of him, he walked over to Todd’s bedroom door, knocking softly. Sharing the same space had felt like eons ago. Cold nights and small beds with too much overhanging tension between the two.

“Come in,” Todd said, and Neil entered, fearing whatever was about to happen.

They stared at each other for a moment too long, the soft light of Todd’s lamps casting some parts of his room in shadows. Neil felt this was too sacred of a space to be sharing. Like he was intruding on something beautiful. And in a way, he was. The man before him had aged, there was no denying that. He’d grown some wrinkles as they all had. From various pictures he’d seen around the apartment, he’d had variations of facial hair. He was clean shaven now, his hair much longer than it had ever been in school. Neil found himself wanting to run his hands through it.

Todd was staring too long, he was sure of it. But the man in front of him was someone to be stared at. He couldn’t take his eyes off. He was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. Neil had sat down in his desk chair, and the two seemed to wait for either to say something first. Todd had never been one to speak up, but he found a voice within as he looked over at Neil.

“I’m sorry I left dinner early. I’m not usually afraid of crowds anymore.”

“I’m sorry that I… well, for everything. I’m sorry for everything.”

“I know you are. I just couldn’t stay. I’m sorry. I was nervous, I guess.”

“You didn’t sound nervous, if that’s any help.”

Todd smiled at him, a little too brightly. He couldn’t help it. “It is. I mean, sometimes I still get clammy before teaching a lecture to my class.”

Neil smiled too, reveling in the shared moment. Knowing that he couldn’t bear to go down whatever path Charlie and Knox had found themselves careening through for however many years, he looked carefully at the man in front of him. Todd looked back, and that was all it took for Neil to decide. He’d always loved him. He was always going to. Timing and internalized homophobia and the law and long ago fears be damned. He couldn’t take any more of it. If he didn’t tell him now, he was going to burst into flames.

“I wanted to tell you that I read your book. I was… I was going on this date with this girl from my med classes. I thought I was doomed to that kind of life. But then I saw your book at the coffee shop, and I left before she even got there. I know that I’ve been shitty to all of you. For years. But after I read your book, I didn’t know how to contact you anymore. And I went through so much with all of those emotions for everyone I’d left behind, I thought I was reliving my senior year winter. I just couldn’t believe what it did to me. Your writing.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about how I’d fucked everything up. I ruined

whatever we'd made those last few years of school. I couldn't stop thinking about how you'd done it. Gone out and lived up to everything Keating always believed you could be. And that terrified me. That you'd done that. Because I thought, it's too late.

"And in a way, it is. It's too late for me to try something new. I'm good at what I do, no matter how much I can't stand it. It is too late for me to try to mend whatever I broke. You know it just as much as I do. But, if I'd told you. With the desk set, or when you were visiting me in the hospital, or when we went sledding when I got better, or when I got drunk and kissed your hands in Charlie's room, or when we graduated. If I'd told you, instead of living and dying by my father's hands, if I'd said something, would you have said something back?"

Todd reached to wipe his eyes swiftly, the breath kicked out of his chest. When had he started crying? Why was he crying?

"I don't know why you have to ask me that."

"Because I need to hear you say it, Todd. That you have. That you did."

Neil stood then, and Todd stood with him, feeling a magnetic pull to the golden boy. The pull had always been intense. Even when they'd met, it felt intoxicating. He knew that even with all the years and confusion between them, he was never going to get over him. No matter how hard he tried.

"Well I loved you. If that's what you're asking me. But I never thought you could ever feel the same way. I thought about it, sure. But I thought it was all in my head."

“I loved you too. So much. I loved you with the madman poem, the desk set. I loved you when my mother told me you hadn’t left the hospital since I’d gotten there. I loved you every minute since you’d arrived our sophomore year.”

“I loved you even after you left. After you stopped talking to me. After I thought you’d died in the war. I loved you through it all. I still love you. And it’s always been as complicated and as simple as that. That I loved you. That I love you still.”

Neil let out a sigh of relief so loudly that Todd couldn’t help but crinkle his lips into a smile. Neil was staring at his shoes a moment, like he’d been hit in the chest with something so large his brain couldn’t process it.

“I’m never going to get over you, Todd Anderson. I’ve tried. I tried so hard. But I couldn’t do it. You’re in my bones.”

“Can I kiss you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m pretty out of practice,” Todd chuckled, walking closer to him, his heart beating loudly as he shakily placed his hands on Neil’s waist.

“Sorry,” Neil said, threading a hand through Todd’s hair before cupping his cheeks. “I’m still wondering if I’m dreaming. If I’m going to wake up soon.”

“If this is a dream, I’m going to be in hell when I wake up.”

“Can you just kiss me already?”

Todd smiled then, not caring about how Knox was going to cry tomorrow from his happiness, how Charlie was going to make jokes about it. All he could think about was how his hands were on Neil Perry, and Neil Perry was kissing him back. This was home. It had been far away, but it was here now. They were home. Back together again like lights in a dark ocean. They’d always burned so brightly. Even after a time apart. Todd was feeling his fears slip away as he fiddled with Neil’s button up, wanting to touch his hot skin.

Neil was also dealing with the pain of wanting everything with the man in front of him, and he was busy folding his fingers under Todd’s sweater, hot, toned skin bleeding through. This was that Heaven he’d prayed for two weeks prior.

Blocks away, Charlie was grappling with something intense. He knew he wasn’t going to see Todd or Neil for the rest of the night. They burned too brightly. They always had. But didn’t he and Knox burn too? In their own separate way, they’d always been together. In one way or another.

“My things still here from the last time?”

“I thought about it.” Charlie answered instead, wondering where this was bubbling from. The timing wasn’t right! Neil just being reintroduced… their fight about physical therapy. God, he could never get it right. But unlike bottling it back up, it was out there now. For whatever it was going to be worth.

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking about it. In fact, I haven’t been able to think about

anything else, really."

"What are you talking about?" Knox furrowed his brow, leaning against Charlie's massive kitchen island, the lengths of the day affecting his leg.

"What you said. About how you don't tell me everything. About Todd."

"Oh."

"Todd loves him, doesn't he? Like how I used to love Nancy."

Knox couldn't live like this any more. The trailing around it. The subject hanging like a low fruit at them. "He's always loved him. Like how you've always loved me."

Silence. Then, "I have," And in seconds, Charlie had tears in his eyes. "I *have* always loved you. I have always loved you, Knox."

And then, in a moment of confusion and severity of everything, Knox started to laugh. Bright, bubbly laughter spread through the air and over them, and Knox's eyes began to fill with tears. Soon, they were both laughing and crying and Knox was hanging onto Charlie because if he fell over from all the laughing, he might have had to go the emergency room.

"I love you, Charlie. I love your daughter. I love your stubbornness. I love how you don't let me do basic human tasks because you're worried I'll hurt myself. I love everything about you."

“We are so stupid.” Charlie said, his eyes still dripping tears, the confession of so many years finally out in the open, making him so, so happy.

“It was never the right time. I’ll give us that.”

“Are we going to argue about timing or are you going to kiss me, dammit?”

“Aren’t we still arguing?”

“About your damn physical therapy?”

“Obviously. I thought you were still mad at me because I’m not moving my position on it.”

“No, love,” Charlie had always wanted to use that-and felt that it rolled off the tongue spectacularly. “I’m mad at you because I just want to take care of you. I want you to want me taking care of you.”

He set his hands on Knox’s thighs then, and it was the first time Knox had ever truly loved Charlie’s immensely gaudy taste in large kitchen furniture. His heart began to speed up. He’d just told Charlie he loved him. Charlie loved him back.

“I’ve loved you since I was 15.” He confessed, off topic and starkly different from Charlie’s last response.

“Well then let me take care of you.”

“It’s too much.”

“It’s never going to be enough, Knox. Baby,” Charlie felt his eyes beginning to well with tears again from it all. “I didn’t even know about you. Obviously we were going to find out late anyways with the damn communication issues, but Todd didn’t tell me. I had a case that was worth $30 million dollars and he didn’t even tell me. Like you were worth less than that.”

“I wouldn’t have either told you either, Charlie. That’s so much and I just had-”

“I didn’t give a fuck about the case. I got back and an hour after I get in, Todd’s at my door ushering me to the hospital. I thought you were going to die.” Charlie looked down then, and Knox did his best to scoot forward on the chair, gripping Charlie’s face tenderly to wipe his tears. “I loved you so much, and I thought you were going to die. The doctor was spewing so much bullshit about how your leg was infected because no one had treated you in ample time and I got really fucking angry. I know Todd didn’t tell you about this, because I didn’t want you to know.”

“Char-”

“I won’t get into it. But I said things that were really shitty to all of your doctors, and I was crying so hard that Todd had to tell me to calm down. Look…” Charlie shifted his weight, grabbing Knox’s hand and running his fingers over it. A gesture he’d always wanted to do to him. “I love you. Nothing is ever too much when you want to spend the rest of your life making sure the one person you love and want to be with most in the world is happy and healthy. And safe.”

“Proposals after only ten minutes? Cocky bastard,” Knox tried to keep his voice light with the joke, but he couldn’t do it. His voice was cracking with all the tears.

“I want a lifetime with you. I spent too much of mine in fear.”

Knox kissed him then, courage built up in his heart. Charlie’s hands squeezed his thighs and felt their way up to his waist, his chest. Knox wanted Charlie’s hands on every part of him. But the day had been so long, and although he felt like he was 17 again, being touched for the first time by someone he’d had feelings for, he couldn’t ignore the shooting pains that were in his leg. Too much walking, standing, too many stairs. Constantly trying to push himself but always paying the price for it.

With reluctance, he pulled away, a trail of spit connecting them a moment longer than their own lips. “‘M sorry,” He muttered, broken and strung out on the feeling.

“For what?” Charlie asked, panting.

“I… I can’t tonight. I want to. Oh my god, I want to. But my leg… it’s really bad. And I just need to take my medicine and go to sleep because I feel like it’s on fire. And so much of me is on fire right now that I might combust.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I’d like to have sex with you, but timing is never our friend.”

Charlie laughed wildly at the confession, his face alight with love. “Let’s get you to bed Mr. Overstreet.”

Love was in the air. For some, it was Meeks and Pitts finally arriving home at 2AM from their friends’, excited to curl up together after pretending to be apart on the train and sleep for hours, exchanging little words of love along the way. For others, it was Neil and Todd, sweaty and giggling and wondering if there was really ever any animosity between them. Todd’s hands were on Neil’s bare chest, and sleep was closing in. If he hadn’t been so tired, he would have had to write every emotion down. For the final pair, it was Knox and Charlie, curled together in Charlie’s too big bed. Knox had said that timing had gotten in their way, but with Knox sleeping against Charlie’s chest, Charlie couldn’t help but feel that timing had never been more right. Everything was falling into place. Moments had given way to hours had given way to years. They weren’t going to know how to ever let the other go.

End Notes

hello lgbt community!!!!!!

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